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ABSTRACT

This report chronicles the work and recommendations of a coalition of educational, public, and private organizations known as the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative. Based on research showing that education in the public schools of Grand Rapids, Michigan, was in a state of crisis, the initiative set out to improve education throughout the system. The initiative was designed to facilitate positive, measurable, comprehensive, and sustainable systemic reform. The initiative created a plan called the Straight A Plan for Grand Rapids Education Reform. The plan contains the following components: alliance (community responsibility for successful education); authority (effective governance that empowers parents); access (choice for all parents); alignment (public school-private school partnerships for efficient and effective operations); and achievement (student achievement and school accountability). Implementation of the plan is expected to take place over a 3-year period starting in 2003. The top priorities of the plan are to: (1) establish school accountability; (2) build community awareness and responsibility: and (3) enhance academic development and training for teachers. (WFA)

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The Straight A Plan for Educational Reform.

Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative

2003

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The Straight A Plan for Education Reform

Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative

Convened by:

Frey Foundation

Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Steelcase Foundation

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A Word of Thanks

The participants in the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative thank the many people who shaped this work with their time, talent, and commitment.

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The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative Leadership Team Presenters

Teresa Arpin, Executive Director of Policy, Assessment and Evaluation, Grand Rapids Public Schools

Andy Bowman, Director of Planning, Grand Valley Metro Council

John Cole, Director, Kent County Friend of the Court

Carol Crawford, Former Chief Financial Officer, Grand Rapids Public Schools

Honorable Bill Hardiman, State Senator

Steve Heacock, Priority Health and former Chairperson, Kent County Board of Commissioners

Rev. George Heartwell, Director, Community Leadership Institute, Aquinas College

Lynn Heemstra, Director, Office of Children, Youth, and Families, City of Grand Rapids

Paul Hill, Ph.D., Director, Center for Reinventing Public Education and Research Professor, University of Washington—Seattle Evans School of Public Affairs

Ruth Jones, Principal, Henry Paideia Academy

Kurt Kimball, City Manager, City of Grand Rapids

Honorable John H. Logie, Mayor, City of Grand Rapids

Gary Miron, Ph.D., Principal Research Associate, Evaluation Center, Western Michigan University

Patricia Newby, Ed.D., Superintendent, Grand Rapids Public Schools 1997-2002

Robert Palaich, Vice President of Policy Studies and Programs, Education Commission of the States

Patrick Sandro, Special Assistant for Charter Schools, Grand Valley State University

Mary Swanson, Human Services Coordinator, Kent County

Donna Van Iwaarden, Ph.D., Director, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy, Grand Valley State University

Michael Washburn, Superintendent, Forest Hills Public Schools

Michael Weiler, Superintendent, Kent Intermediate School District

Andrew Zylstra, Director, Kent County Family Independence Agency

ERI Design Team Members

Susan Broman
Donnalee Holton
Win Irwin
Juan R. Olivarez, Ph.D.
Milt Rohwer
Diana R. Sieger
Margaret Sellers-Walker

Chicago School Reform and Community Engagement Presenters

Donald M. Stewart, President and CEO, The Chicago Community Trust

Terry Mazany, Senior Program Officer and Director, Education Initiative

Anne Hallett, Executive Director, Cross City Campaign

John Ayers, Executive Director, Leadership for Quality Education, Civic Committee of Chicago

Sandra Guthman, President, Polk Bros. Foundation

Sarah Solotaroff, Vice-President of Programs, The Chicago Community Trust

B.J. Walker, Chief of Human Infrastructure, Office of the Mayor, City of Chicago

Allen Bearden, Assistant to President for QUEST/Educational Issues, Chicago Teachers Union

Victoria Chou, Dean, School of Education, University of Illinois at Chicago

Joan Crisler, Principal, Dixon Elementary School

Idida Perez, Executive Director, West Town Leadership United; Board President, Chicago School Leadership Cooperative

Melissa Roderick, Director, Strategic Planning and Development, Chicago Public Schools

Don Moore, Executive Director, Designs for Change

Ken Rolling, Executive Director, Chicago Annenberg Challenge

Milwaukee Site Visit Presenters

Dan McKinley, PAVE

Sherry Street, American Educational Reform Foundation

John Gardner, Milwaukee Public School Board

Emily Van Dunk, Public Policy Forum

Willie Jude, Milwaukee Public Schools

Jeanette Mitchell, Helen Bader Foundation, former School Board President, MPS

Bob Pavlik, Institute for the Transformation of Learning

Zakiya Courtney, Institute for the Transformation of Learning

Meeting Facilitation Consultants

John Cleveland
Julie Cowie
Gwen Gaines-Moffit
Penny Pestle

ERI Media Expertise

Mary Greene
Kate Washburn
Tim Wondergem

Report Contributors

Wendy Lewis Jackson, Research and Content, GRCF
Mary Greene, Editor, GRCF
Kate L. Luckert, Content Advisor, GRCF
Jill Tiefenbach, Support, GRCF
Robin McGue, Support, GRCF
Amy LeFebre, Support, Wondergem Consulting
James Falk, Design and Layout, Falk Design

Public Perception Research Consultants

Jeff Gartner
Lee Jacokes
Lisa Oliver King
Paul Pearson

Please see back cover for members of the Education Reform Initiative Leadership Team.

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Healthy Schools for a Healthy Community

If you want to live in a community with

- strong families
- thriving businesses
- world-class cultural opportunities
- competitive colleges and universities
- quality health care
- manageable social service needs

the fate of Grand Rapids Public Schools matters to you.

The economic and cultural health of Greater Grand Rapids… the city, the suburbs, and the outskirts… depends on providing quality schools for all children. A healthy metropolitan area requires a healthy urban core, and a healthy urban core requires healthy urban schools.

The consequences of producing an uneducated and under-educated population are many.

- businesses find it harder to recruit qualified workers
- fewer residents are capable of earning a living wage
- more people require some form of public assistance
- fewer people are financially capable of buying homes
- fewer people are adequately insured, straining the health care system
- more people need help from social and human service organizations
- cultural organizations have fewer supporters and patrons
- institutions of higher learning attract fewer students

*This report chronicles the work of the **Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative**, led by three local foundations and dozens of community representatives.*

If you care about the economic and cultural health of Greater Grand Rapids, this report matters to you.

If the crisis situation in Grand Rapids' city schools is not reversed, everyone in the greater Grand Rapids area will eventually suffer the consequences.

A Community Wake-Up Call

Look around Grand Rapids and you will see a dynamic, vibrant urban center. Construction is underway on a new $200 million convention center. Thriving healthcare, medical research, and health education facilities line Michigan Street, earning it the nickname "The Medical Miracle Mile." A 12,000-plus seat sports and entertainment arena, a glittering riverside public museum, an abundance of downtown restaurants and clubs, expansion of the downtown campus at Grand Valley State University, and a thriving historic residential district all demonstrate a commitment to our central city. Over the past ten years, the pace, scale, and scope of such projects has transformed our urban landscape and this level of investment has fundamentally changed the economic and political infrastructure of our region to meet 21st century opportunities.

But stop. Look a little deeper. Dig through the bricks and mortar to the true foundation of our community—our youth—and with them in mind, ask yourself if we are truly a healthy, vibrant urban center. Are all children in the City of Grand Rapids receiving a quality education that will prepare them for a productive life in a 21st century workforce? Are all children even receiving an adequate education? Are we, the citizens of Grand Rapids and its surrounding communities, paying sufficient attention to the health of our schools? Have we done everything in our power to ensure that the children attending our urban schools are well-educated? Unfortunately, the answer to these questions is "no."

The participants in the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative have seen our schools suffer from benign neglect, and access to a quality education for those in the City of Grand Rapids has become a scarce commodity. In the same period when our community celebrated multi-million dollar capital improvements in the heart of the city, our urban schools were physically and financially crumbling around our children. By allowing this, we all have failed to take notice of the single most important factor that will preserve and build on the accomplishments of the past—a well-educated child.

The case is compelling that urban education in Grand Rapids is in a state of crisis. If current revenue and enrollment projections hold, in perhaps as little as two years the Grand Rapids Public Schools could reach its "tipping point," where declining enrollment will preclude financial stability. If this happens, it will be impossible for the organization to carry out its mission to "ensure that all students are educated, self-directed, and productive members of society."

Our research findings demonstrate that this spiral of decline can be traced to many factors, from the lack of equitable financial resources to competition. No single person, decision, or activity can be blamed for the decline of excellence in the Grand Rapids Public Schools. Instead, it is important to understand that a multitude of societal, economic, and personal choices have created a domino effect to erode public confidence in the ability of the Grand Rapids Public Schools to carry out its mission.

Some of us have watched this decline from afar, believing that if we didn't have children attending the Grand Rapids Public Schools or didn't live within the city limits, then it wasn't our problem. As a community, we are quickly learning that our shortsightedness has important ramifications. Challenges within the Grand Rapids Public Schools are of regional concern and the school district is a vital component in any effort to position the City as an urban center. We can no longer afford the point-of-view that the Grand Rapids Public Schools are not a critical component in the health and vitality of the City and the region.

This is not a criticism of those who have worked so hard to revitalize this city. It is through their vision that this community is moving forward based on its traditions of leadership and ingenuity. We should all take pride in our accomplishments to improve the quality of life in Grand Rapids, for only a handful of municipalities in the United States can lay claim to successfully revitalizing their downtown regions. Yet, there is still an important challenge remaining that we must now have the spirit and stamina to address—reforming our system of urban education. Only then can Grand Rapids truly become the flagship urban center for the State of Michigan. If our community, city and suburban residents continue to ignore the health of our schools, the cost for all of us will be immeasurable.

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative began with an honest recognition that if we are serious about improving our system of urban education, it is critical to embrace a common strategy. Therefore, unlike prior reform projects that failed to achieve scale or sustainability, the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative is designed to avoid the pitfalls of the past by facilitating positive, measurable, comprehensive, and sustainable systemic reform. The Initiative is a collaborative that exists to ensure that our community supports the right of all children within the City of Grand Rapids to receive a quality education.

We will focus on promoting reforms within the Grand Rapids Public Schools, because despite an array of public and private learning options for children in the City of Grand Rapids, the Grand Rapids Public School District, due to its size and mandate, is still the educational anchor for most children in the community. By employing the same ingenuity used in our community to build the political and economic infrastructure for a flagship city, the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative will mobilize a call to action on behalf of urban education to create multiple pathways to excellence for all children.

This is a community wake-up call.

"At the heart of all reforms is one crystal clear goal: improving student achievement. Only when we have helped every student succeed will we consider this effort a success."

Milt Rohwer,
President,
Frey Foundation

Who Are We?

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative

"Educating this community's children is a community trust. If you care about the future of this community, you must care about the education of its children. All of them."

Diana R. Sieger
President
Grand Rapids
Community Foundation

In early 1999, a series of conversations among members of the Regional Issues Committee of the Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce focused on the most immediate challenges facing the greater Grand Rapids region. From this dialogue, public education, and more specifically, the overall capacity of the Grand Rapids Public Schools to meet community expectations of quality and achievement, came to the forefront as an issue requiring immediate attention. It was at this time that the Frey Foundation, Grand Rapids Community Foundation, and Steelcase Foundation, with the encouragement and support of community leaders, stepped forward to combine their collective resources and leadership to initiate meaningful education reform in the City of Grand Rapids. The sponsoring foundations were approached to lead this effort based on their neutrality, ability to convene a diverse cross-section of the community, and capacity to focus on systemic reform instead of one-time programs or other short-term, quick-fix solutions. More important, there was recognition that perhaps unlike any other community institution, foundations are uniquely suited to put in place a long-term community school reform structure that could transcend the constant leadership changes and distractions that are often characteristic of the public school system. Each of the sponsoring foundations has committed to this effort for the next 20 years, implementing key stages of the reform in five-year increments.

Over the past fifteen years, many attempts were made to improve or enhance Grand Rapids Public Schools. As a community, we have experienced no shortage of good ideas. Therefore, numerous special projects and innovative programs have been implemented. The Grand Rapids Public School District led some of these efforts. Others were driven by collaborations and partnerships among various community organizations. Despite this energy and commitment to improve, however, few efforts have blossomed into comprehensive reforms that last. As a result, no community glue holds the efforts together, and we are left with an unconnected mosaic of projects and special interests with no common vision or purpose.

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative officially began its work in the spring of 2000 as a federation of community interests representing the business, labor, educational, elected, philanthropic, and citizen leadership of the Grand Rapids metropolitan area.

On Solid Ground

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative began with the goal that every child in the City of Grand Rapids should have access to a quality education. After 2½ years of careful deliberation and research, participants in the Initiative have issued a comprehensive blueprint for reform. We are well aware, however, that it is very easy to issue ideas and proclamations about change. Achieving results is the hard part; without results, this work is nothing more than another set of empty promises and well-intentioned ideas. Because we believe that children in Grand Rapids deserve more than another plan, the ERI is prepared to implement sustainable strategies that emphasize:

Long-term commitment

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative is uniquely different. Because sustaining reform was a key consideration from the beginning, the sponsoring foundations have made a 20-year commitment to the effort. By engaging civic leadership beyond the boundaries of the public school system, we will work to ensure that the outcomes of the Straight A Plan are accomplished.

Well-researched ideas that are connected to results

We are committed to pursuing proven reforms that are grounded by clear outcomes. Although we recognize that the strategies contained in this platform may change, the desired outcomes will not. In this context, we will focus our work on the kind of civic, workplace, and life skills that students should acquire in the course of their education.

Community-wide response

Community responsibility for education is a major theme of the Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative. We believe it is unrealistic to expect the Grand Rapids Public Schools to reform itself so significantly that marked gains in student achievement can be realized. Instead, the leadership and support of the community is required to make student achievement for all children a reality. This means that the community must put children first and not have its vision deterred by the bureaucratic and political turf battles that can often derail education reform. Furthermore, the community must maintain a delicate balance between applying the necessary outside pressure for GRPS to improve and actively supporting teachers, students, and parents in the process.

The initiative is a student-centered and independent community collaborative. As such, our strategies will now focus on ensuring the necessary changes within both the school system and the broader community, to guarantee high quality learning options for children in Grand Rapids.

We have issued an ambitious agenda for reform. This is a testimony to how serious we believe this issue is to the continued vitality of Grand Rapids. Our challenge will be to maintain the strength that made the ERI unique during the research and development phase into implementation.

Straight A Plan for Grand Rapids Education Reform

ALLIANCE

Community Responsibility for Successful Education

- ☐ Launch community school readiness programs
- ☐ Seek adequate and equitable financing for physical infrastructure
- ☐ Create a School Facilities Management Authority
- ☐ Realign community health and human services to support student achievement
- ☐ Advocate for the Michigan State Legislature to establish the City of Grand Rapids as an Educational Enterprise Zone
- ☐ Establish an independent Education Research Organization or Collaboration of Researchers to track, monitor, analyze, interpret, and report community progress in school reform and student achievement
- ☐ Educate the broader community on the importance of education reform

AUTHORITY

Effective Governance that Empowers Parents

- ☐ Empower parents, principals, and teachers through elected Neighborhood School Councils
- ☐ If circumstances warrant, advocate for the transition to a Grand Rapids Community Education Authority

ACCESS

Choice for All Parents

- ☐ Make the Grand Rapids Public Schools the choice for parents through the creation of innovative schools
- ☐ Provide equality of school choice for all parents
- ☐ Ensure equality of mandate for all schools supported by public funding
- ☐ Ensure equality of mandate among public and non-public schools to the extent possible

ALIGNMENT

Public/Private Partnerships for Efficient and Effective Operations

- ☐ Unite the current public and non-public school systems of the larger community
- ☐ Foster operating efficiency
- ☐ Offer incentives to schools that improve their performance

ACHIEVEMENT

Student Achievement and School Accountability

- ☐ Implement a community K-12 Accountability System that measures school performance based on community, state, and national standards
- ☐ Guarantee student competency of fundamental skills, especially reading skills by third grade
- ☐ Build high expectations for secondary schools and foster a culture of achievement in secondary schools based on national best practices and sound educational research
- ☐ Collaborate with the Grand Rapids Education Association to create an innovative community model for teacher recruitment, professional development, and retention

Straight A Plan Recommendations

1. Community Responsibility for Successful Education

"Thousands of children rely on the urban center's educational offerings—all of whom deserve quality instruction, adequate funding and safe facilities."

Susan Broman,
Executive Director,
Steelcase Foundation

Launch community school readiness programs

Children come to kindergarten with varying degrees of readiness to succeed in school. Yet, research shows that perhaps too many children—particularly children from areas of high concentrations of poverty—are starting school unprepared to perform basic educational or developmental tasks such as the ability to distinguish shapes and colors, hold a pencil, or share with others.

To ensure school readiness and support parents in this partnership for education, we recommend offering comprehensive early childhood education, before/after school care, and health and human service programs for all preschool and kindergarten-age children.

Seek adequate and equitable financing for physical infrastructure

Renovating and/or constructing new school facilities to replace unsafe and in many cases dilapidated buildings is an issue shared by just about every urban school district in Michigan. For many, including Grand Rapids, the amount of financial resources needed to truly bring school facilities up to safe standards and maintain them without impacting the operating funds of a school district would require solutions beyond what any one community can do on its own.

We recommend forming a public/private partnership of community interests to spearhead an effort to bring equity to the issue of facility construction, maintenance, and reconstruction, so that poorer districts are not forced to consume precious operating dollars to patch deteriorating buildings, while wealthy districts are able to offer their students lavish schools of tomorrow.

Create a school Facilities Management Authority

The ERI recommends the creation of a Facilities Management Authority, pulling together private sector facilities management expertise and school system knowledge of education for the construction, management, and reconstruction of school facilities.

Where we educate our children is just as important as how we do it. The drive for quality facilities that enhance learning should not be dismissed as just an exercise in aesthetics. Clean, safe, and well-equipped facilities not only reflect the value we as a community place on education, they also speak volumes about the respect we have for our children.

Realign community health and human services to support student achievement

We recommend that schools in areas of high need become the focus of coordinated efforts by the community's health and human service agencies to support families and encourage student achievement. The Kent County Family Independence Agency has devised a promising concept by which their staff would be deployed at schools with a mandate to explore potential family needs as soon as a school absence occurs. We recommend this be implemented and expanded to other community agencies like the Kent County Health Department and Kent County Community Mental Health. Furthermore, this kind of change could serve as the framework for building "community" schools that offer an array of services for children and families on-site.

Straight A Plan Recommendations

Advocate for the Michigan State Legislature to establish the City of Grand Rapids as an Educational Enterprise Zone

The Enterprise or Renaissance Zone concept has been used in the economic development arena to generate virtually tax-free incentives for business or residents to relocate and/or expand within a designated geographic area. In order to implement education reform in our community, we propose expanding this concept to education. Such an Educational Enterprise Zone would serve as the legislative umbrella for many of the reform strategies identified in this platform. Additionally, such a zone could provide additional resources and tax credits or incentives for families or business that invest in our urban schools. However, we strongly advocate that Enterprise Zones not be used to break current union contract requirements.

Establish an independent Education Research Organization or Collaboration of Researchers to track, monitor, analyze, interpret, and report community progress in school reform and student achievement

For comprehensive reform to occur, the community must play a significant role in monitoring the performance of schools. Yet, it is difficult to obtain an independent and objective assessment of how public and non-public schools perform in Grand Rapids due to inconsistent outcome measures and definitions, different methods of collecting and reporting data, and the lack of primary research generated in the community on educational performance. During the ERI process, we learned that some information, particularly related to the performance of non-public schools, was inaccessible.

Access to quality research and analysis that tracks the performance of individual schools is a critical ingredient for the successful implementation of reform strategies such as those proposed by the ERI. Such research does more than just quantify the numbers. Objective data analysis can assist our community in anticipating trends and help us make well-informed decisions about educational quality. It can help our community focus on results and answer critical questions such as why some schools are successful in certain indicators and others with perhaps the same or even greater resources are unable to demonstrate improvement.

Educate the broader community on the importance of education reform

Based on research conducted by the ERI on the perceptions of the public schools and their impact on the city and the metropolitan area, it is imperative to provide the broader community with objective information on educational successes and challenges, and engage them in the topic of education reform.

2. Effective Governance that Empowers Parents

A well-governed school system establishes the foundation for student achievement and success. The roots of school governance for the Grand Rapids Public Schools date back to 1871, when the legislature created the Board of Education for the City of Grand Rapids. However, to realistically meet the challenge of producing students prepared for the 21st century we now need a school governance structure that allows for greater expertise, longer terms of commitment, broader community representation, consistency of direction, and stability of leadership.

Neighborhood councils would give schools the needed freedom to customize improvements to fit their unique situation. What better way to build school and neighborhood pride than to allow the people of that school and neighborhood a hand in building the best learning environment possible for their children.

Empower parents, principals, and teachers through elected Neighborhood School Councils

We recommend that Grand Rapids Public School Board set a date for the creation of Neighborhood School Councils at each school site. Such Councils would be charged with the responsibility of selecting the principal and performing functions that could include:

- Setting school goals and vision
- Supporting staff development
- Reviewing curriculum, budget, and schedules
- Addressing safety concerns
- Developing community services and before and after school activities
- Promoting technological and instructional opportunities

If circumstances warrant, advocate for the transition to a Grand Rapids Community Education Authority

The ERI believes that if individual schools are empowered and supported by the Board of Education and central administration, a truly successful system can emerge. However, if the system fails to meet the challenge, we strongly recommend and would advocate for the implementation of an alternative governance system to assume the overall governance of the Grand Rapids Public Schools.

3. Choice for All Parents

For Grand Rapids Public Schools the challenge is to achieve the status of being the school of choice for a growing number of parents and students. In fact, the ERI recommendations are directed at just that.

Make the Grand Rapids Public Schools the choice for parents through the creation of innovative schools

In today's competitive educational environment, the Grand Rapids Public Schools has an obligation and an opportunity to attract students to innovative schools that capitalize on the special resources of the central city. The following are examples of assets, which could become the focus of a school or schools that would serve the city and attract students from other districts.

- Virtually every arts and cultural institution in the community is located in the city
- Virtually all of the higher education institutions in the community are located in the city
- The city's ethnic diversity could itself become an asset for a number of schools that also achieve exemplary academic programs

With regard to school choice, the ERI further recommends:

- Provide equality of school choice for ***all parents***
- Ensure equality of mandate for ***all schools*** supported by public funding
- Ensure equality of mandate among ***public and non-public schools to the extent possible***

With all of the competitive options currently available, not every parent has equal access or opportunity to exercise a choice. This is further complicated by the fact that public schools are mandated by the state and federal government to provide certain services and programs that non-public schools do not have to provide. So, in order for parents to be make informed choices about schools they have to be aware that not every school receiving public funding is held to the same legal and administrative requirements as public schools. Nor is every school system held to the same standards of public accountability. In each of these instances, the "playing field is not level."

In order for competition to work, the community must insist on a level playing field by ensuring equality of school choice for all parents, instituting equality of mandate for all community schools supported by public funding, and requiring equality of mandate among public and non-public schools to the extent possible. To the degree that choice does exist, we recommend that children from low-income families have the same choice as those whose resources are not so limited.

4. Public/Private Partnerships for Efficient and Effective Operations

Unite the current public and non-public school systems of the larger community

The ERI believes that there is a great potential for the Kent Intermediate School District, supported by the Kent Intermediate Superintendent's Association (composed of private and parochial school superintendents), to be a strong leader in the arena of efficient and effective schools. We recommend that these organizations, the ISD and ISA, adopt the proposition that if one district—public or private—is failing, the whole Intermediate District has failed. Or conversely, in order for the Intermediate District to succeed, all must succeed.

Foster operating efficiency

If competing manufacturers in this community can find areas for collaboration and joint action through efforts like the Manufacturers Council of The Right Place Program, then public and private schools/city and suburban schools can do the same. If urban education in Grand Rapids is to be effective, GRPS will require collaborative efforts on a regional basis in several areas. The ERI believes that great potential exists in the areas of joint purchasing, curriculum development, professional development, and especially special education. Since the provision of special education services is of concern and benefit to all public and private school districts in Kent County, we strongly recommend that the entire community adopt a regional approach to financing these services. Therefore, under the leadership of the Kent County Intermediate School District we propose that a regional financing structure be considered for special education services.

Offer incentives to schools that improve their performance

The Intermediate School District could become the vehicle for creating and funding incentives for improved school performance in each building. If designed and implemented properly, incentives could serve as strong motivators for excellence but also foster a collaborative spirit within schools as administrators, staff, and parents work together as a team.

Straight A Plan Recommendations

5. Student Achievement and School Accountability

The ERI has resisted the temptation to embrace certain seemingly attractive programs aimed at student achievement that appear promising but fall short of system reform. There are, however, recommendations that need to be offered.

Implement a Community K-12 Accountability System that measures school performance based on community, state, and national standards

The ERI pledges to maintain a focus on high performance standards and continuous improvement with special attention to demonstrable outcomes for student learning.

Guarantee student competency of fundamental skills, especially reading, by the third grade

Educational research speaks to the importance of all children achieving certain fundamental skills by the third grade or the end of third grade. This must be a school-by-school, student-by-student measure and basis for accountability.

Build high expectations for secondary schools and foster a culture of achievement based on national best practices and sound educational research

The ERI resists the temptation to recommend specific programs, but insists that a focus be put on strategies to meet the needs and increase the numbers of students pursuing college, vocational training, and/or moving directly to the workforce. Parents have the right to expect it and the community's employers must demand it.

We recommend that GRPS overhaul its instructional methodology to nurture the skills that will help students succeed and compete in an information-based economy. Those fundamentals include a mastery of basic reading, writing, and math skills, competency in interpersonal communications, and proficiency at critical thinking. Furthermore, this skill base must connect to the fundamental purpose of the American education system—to develop good citizens.

Collaborate with the Grand Rapids Education Association to create an innovative community model for teacher recruitment, professional development, and retention

At the heart of school reform is the interaction between a teacher and student. Therefore, school reform must be deep enough to enter the classroom and fundamentally impact the learning environment. In order to do this, the community must support and nurture its teachers. Yet, at the same time, the teacher's union must assume a leadership role to ensure that innovation can foster with the support of quality teaching staff.

Making it Work

Implementation of the Straight A Plan for Grand Rapids Education Reform will happen in multiple phases. Our initial focus for the next three years will be in the following areas:

Priority #1: Establish school accountability

What you don't measure, you can't change.

The ERI will work with community experts to identify a set of indicators that will be used to track school performance and our community's overall progress toward reform.

Priority #2: Build community awareness and responsibility

What we don't know can hurt us.

The ERI will work to facilitate a partnership between the media and educators to provide the community with a persistent message and encourage broader dialogue on the issue of education reform and its importance to the vitality of Grand Rapids.

Priority #3: Enhance academic development and training for teachers.

By learning you will teach, by teaching you will learn.

The ERI will collaborate with the Grand Rapids Education Association and local colleges and universities to create a community model for teacher leadership.

Conclusion

The work of the Education Reform Initiative began because many community leaders saw the education of this community's children as a community trust. We have learned that the Grand Rapids Public Schools can only keep its promise to every student when:

- Young children begin Kindergarten prepared for a stimulating learning environment
- Students are given a demanding curriculum that requires mastery of the subject
- Teachers are highly skilled and well trained in their subject matter
- All parents have the freedom to choose the academic environment that is best for their child
- Individual schools are empowered to plan and manage their educational program
- Schools are supported by a central governance structure
- Facilities are conducive to safe learning and are equitably and adequately financed
- There is broad financial and non-financial support from the community

On the surface, these key ingredients seem obviously straightforward and comprise a simple recipe for success. Yet, as a community, we have only been willing to ensure these necessities for some children—not all. Our community can no longer afford to invest in the potential of only some children. To be viable, Grand Rapids needs every child to receive a quality education. We will continue to work to make sure all of this community's children receive the education they deserve.

The Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative Leadership Team Participants

Teresa Arpin, Executive Director of Policy, Assessment & Evaluation, Grand Rapids Public Schools

Claudia Bajema, Director, Seidman Graduate Services, and Advising, GSVU, former Grand Rapids Public Schools Board Member

Susan Broman, Executive Director, Steelcase Foundation

David Bulkowski, Executive Director, Disability Advocates of Kent County and Grand Rapids Public Schools Board Member

Sharon Buursma, Executive Vice President, Spectrum Health

John Cole, Director, Kent County Friend of the Court

Beverly Drake, Executive Director, Area Community Services Employment & Training

Ben Emdin, Chief Operating Officer, Grand Rapids Public Schools

Jeanne Englehart, Community Service Director, Staff Contact for Congressman Vernon Ehlers

Dan Gaydou, Publisher, Grand Rapids Press

Perry Grueber, Director of Investors & Corporate Relations, Steelcase, Inc.

Rev. George Heartwell, Director, Community Leadership Institute, Aquinas College

Donnalee Holton, Community Advocate

Win Irwin, President, Irwin Seating Corporation

John Kennedy, President, Autocam Corporation

Kurt Kimball, City Manager, City of Grand Rapids

Anthony King, CEO, Family Health Center of Kalamazoo

Birgit Klohs, President, The Right Place Program

Hank Kroondyk, Development Director, Home Repair Services of Kent County

Anna Kruse, Program Coordinator, Grand Rapids Area Chamber of Commerce

Honorable John H. Logie, Mayor, City of Grand Rapids

Frank Lynn, Education Task Force Leader, Michigan Organizing Project

Jim McClean, Grand Rapids Public Schools CEO Advisory Committee Member

Sue Maturkanich, President, Grand Rapids Education Association

Oluwatoyin (Toyin) Moore, Consultant, Williams Group

Kathleen Muir, Community Advocate

Mark Murray, President, Grand Valley State University

Patricia Newby, Ed.D., Superintendent, Grand Rapids Public Schools 1997-2002

Patricia Oldt, Special Assistant to President for Equity and Planning, GVSU

Juan R. Olivarez, Ph.D., President, Grand Rapids Community College

Linda Patterson, Executive Director, Dyer-Ives Foundation

Tamera Ramaker, Former Executive Director, Arts Council of Greater Grand Rapids

Dale Robertson, Vice President, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Michigan

Milton Rohwer, President, Frey Foundation

Margaret Sellers-Walker, Associate Director, Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy

Diana R. Sieger, President, Grand Rapids Community Foundation

Sue Stauffacher, Community Advocate

Gordon Van Harn, Trustee, Van Andel Institute, Former Grand Rapids Public Schools Board Member

J. Michael Washburn, Superintendent, Forest Hills Public Schools

John Wheeler, President, Rockford Construction

Andrew Zylstra, Director, Kent County Family Independence Agency

Grand Rapids Education Reform Initiative
c/o Grand Rapids Community Foundation
161 Ottawa Avenue NW, 209-C
Grand Rapids, MI 49503-2757

For more information, call 616.454.1751
www.grfoundation.org

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